

COVER STORY

By KAYODE FASUA

For many residents of Lagos State, the fear of 'Area G' formation in the state's police command is the beginning of wisdom. Widely referred to as 'Area Gold', the formation, which assumed that cant three years ago, is housed in an unappealing bungalow at the heartland of Ogba. The area command only dissembled the real opulence that is the lifestyle of many a man and officer

attached to the weather-beaten command office. It has become a goldmine for those men of the corps who see the police service as an avenue for robbing and pillaging.

But, on Wednesday, May 24, this year, the cookie finally crumbled. What would have been another round of successful robbery operation for the robber-cops turned sour. The gang, headed by an assistant superintendent of police, ASP, had stumbled on a scoop, through an informant, that someone residing in the Iju area of Lagos had over N50 million 'raw

cash' in the confines of his bedroom. Promptly, the gang cooked up a tall story to obtain arms from the office. They reported that they were going to arrest an alleged Internet fraudster, otherwise called *yahoo boy*, who had defrauded a foreign businessman. They got the go-ahead, alright, and went for the kill. But the mission turned out to be a mistake.

Unknown to them, a sleuth had come to judgment. An undercover agent, a young, dashing officer dispatched to smash the gang, was actually at work. The officer intercepted their coded conversation via his walkie-talkie. He begged to be admitted into the 'anti-robbery squad', claiming to 'understand

The Enemies Next Door



Increasing wave of armed robbery cases involving police and soldiers raises fresh concerns about the safety of Nigerians

the game'. In no time, a friend within the group had helped him decode the Iju robbery plan. He then went behind and organised a counter-offensive that overpowered the police robbers. Already, no fewer than six policemen are being kept behind bars over the serial robbery. Owolabi Oveibo, an ASP, Johnson Onyeukwu, an inspector, and Aminu Shaibu, a sergeant, are reportedly helping police investigators at the State Criminal Investigation Department, SCID, Panti, to get to the root of the sordid deed.

The 'Area G' mafia, before it was unmasked, had wreaked havoc in the banking

sector. Four months ago, it raided a Lagos bank and looted foreign currencies, valued at over N48 million, from its vault. Each member of the gang reportedly wielded his AK47 rifle, a service weapon, to perpetrate the act. A member of the gang, an inspector, recently confessed to the police that his share from the bank loot was N9 million, which he kept in the bank account of a confidant.

The malaise of robbery by law

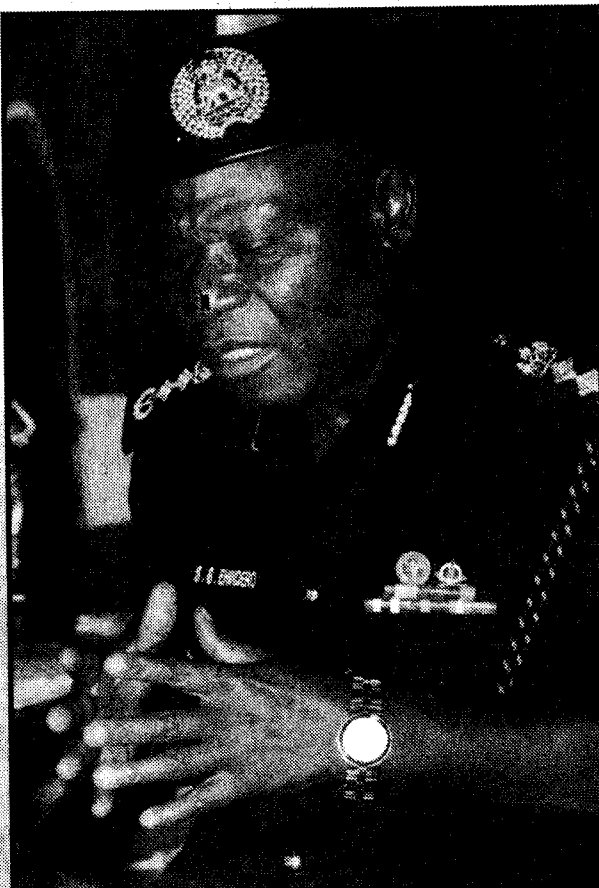
enforcement agents is by no means limited to Lagos, the ever-boisterous commercial nerve centre of the nation. It looks like a nationwide cankerworm. In Edo and Delta states, the authorities are distressed over confusion created in ascertaining who the real robber is. In April, a first generation bank was robbed in broad daylight at Auchu, Edo State, reportedly by men in army uniform. Millions of naira was carted away in the operation which claimed three lives, including that of a top official of Auchu Polytechnic. Also, in May, a gang of bandits laid siege to the Benin-Asaba Expressway, killing one passenger and raping many women aboard the ill-fated luxury bus with the inscription "The Young Shall Grow". One of the raped victims told the magazine that the hoodlums were dressed in police uniform, a claim corroborated by other passengers. In Delta State, on May 15, the state police command said it foiled an attempt by some hoodlums dressed in army uniform to rob a bullion van conveying a sum of N78 million from Benin City, the Edo State capital, to Warri in Delta State. Even, Abuja, the federal capital territory, is not insulated from the police-robber menace. Early this year, a gang of daredevil armed men stormed a bank at the central area of Abuja in daylight and escaped with millions of naira. And, eventually, when the men were arrested, they were found to have been led by one Matthew, a police corporal. Police investigations revealed that a day after the robbery operation, Matthew had rushed to buy a Toyota Carina 11 car out of his share of the loot.

Across the country, tales abound of how law enforcement agents, basking in gun-barrel power, have been creating nightmares for Nigerians while engaging in criminal acts. The 'Area G' scandal in Lagos, sources said, caused sore embarrassment to the highest echelons in the Nigeria Police, more so as information on the big exposé had been obtained by the Presidency. This, it was learnt, resulted in massive transfer and redeployment of personnel recently witnessed in the command.

Emmanuel Adebayo, the state's police commissioner, reflecting upon the incident, said it was a sad one. In an interview with the magazine, Adebayo said he was able to burst the syndicate "through an internal monitoring system, a kind of detective approach, to fish out bad eggs". According to him, the changing face of crime has necessitated the police authorities fine-tuning their tactics.

Investigations by the magazine reveal that both the police and army personnel are culpable in this gale of

Weapons and uniform recovered from armed robbers



Ehindero: Reads the riot act

Shot dead: An armed robber in police uniform

Cover Story



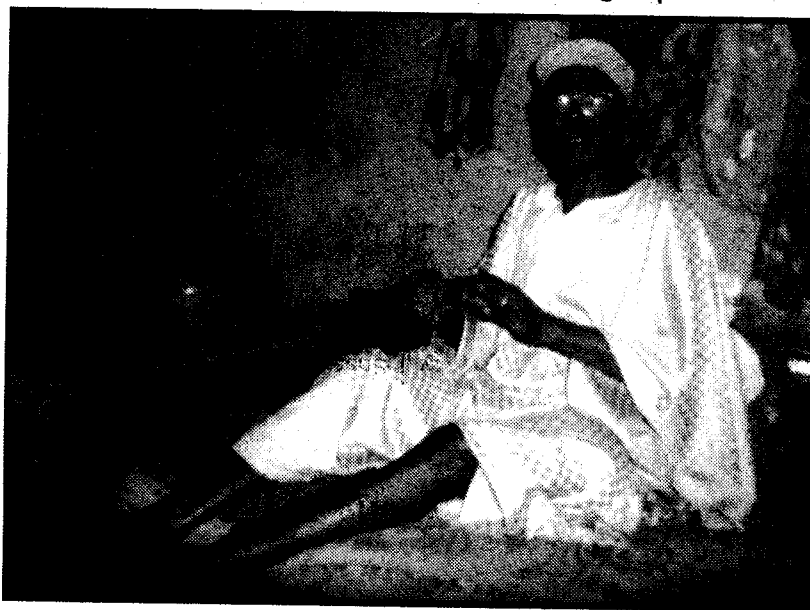
Police robbers arrested in Kaduna

professional perversion. Specifically, some officers and men of the two services had at one time or the other been fingered in bank robbery, cooked-up operation which turned out to be robbery and highway robbery usually garbed in the mounting of checkpoints. To add to that, uniformed men could sometimes be used as hired killers by those seeking their own pound of flesh. For instance, early last month in Enugu State, reports said three gunmen in military uniform trailed Oscar Egwuonwu, chairman of Udi Local Government and a renowned critic of the state government. When the soldiers/assassins missed their target, they went on to attack his aide, shooting him in the leg. After thorough investigations, police authorities in the state discovered that the bloodhounds were some soldiers from the 82 Army Division in Enugu. They were later reportedly court-martialled and dismissed from the army.

Also, some Nigerians have fallen victim to brazen robbery acts by uniformed men hiding under the cloak of erecting checkpoints. A respected professor from Ondo State (names withheld), last month, had a full dose of how policemen stationed at public highways to combat criminals transmuted to criminals. He recalled how some goons, clad in police uniform, flagged him down, having barely driven past

the Akoko-Edo area of Edo State on his way to Abuja. Impatient with niceties, the policemen, he said, shoved him aside from the driver's seat. One of them taking over the wheel, they drove him away but later halted after some minutes' drive. "They then ransacked me, took thousands of naira from my pocket, asked me to alight and then drove away," he said. Thus, he had been robbed of his car. But after getting back to Ondo State through the help of a Good Samaritan, he contacted a member of his family who got across to the state police commissioner. And within hours, his snatched car was found!

Similar situation befell Waidi Adewale, chairman of Mechanics Association in Babs Animashaun area of Surulere, Lagos.



Ojuolape: Gives indicting testimony about the police

Some gun-wielding mobile police stationed at Oshodi had arrested him on an alleged traffic offence. They entered his vehicle and forced him to undertake a journey that took them to as far as Mowe precinct of Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. There the tension-soaked journey ended. They robbed him of N85,000 and bade him farewell.

Moshood Tijani, vice chairman of Itesiwaju Local Government area of Oyo State, is still miffed. A month ago, he went to Iyaganku police headquarters in Ibadan, Oyo State, in the company of six members of the local council vigilante group. The bone of contention was that some armed robbers numbering five, had been arrested by the vigilante squad. To his chagrin, Tijani discovered that the police in the area had communicated Ibadan, the state capital, that the hoodlums were innocent. In the end, the six vigilante men were detained on an 'illegal arrest'. "I could not bear what I saw," he said. "I told the police that, rather than detain my kinsmen, they should detain me. And so, I was detained," Tijani told a magazine. According to him, he and his kinsmen from Shaki, Otu and Ipapo were kept behind bars for no just cause. In this situation, in the local council fuelled by beliefs that police anti-robbery squads detailed to the area were collaborating with armed bandits.

In yet another case that smacks of collaboration with men of the underworld, Jimoh Ojuolape, a nonagenarian and chairman of guard of Ipapo Community Bank, Itesiwaju Local Government of Oyo State, recalled how the bank was attacked.

He said the hoodlums arrived at about 2 am, just after midnight, and an armed policeman had bumped into the bank premises two hours earlier. "To my surprise, riot policemen kept guard nearby immediately after the attack," he said. Luckily, the hoodlums were unable to achieve their aim. All the same, they succeeded in killing Yekini Gbolarin, a member of the community's vigilante group.

But, barely a month after the bank robbery, workers' salary, totalling N4 million, had been snatched by armed bandits at the Otu Local Government area.

Fingerprint Equipment Now Available

— Emmanuel Adebayo, commissioner of police, Lagos State

By KAYODE FASUA and ADESHINA OYETAYO

A robbery incident was said to have involved some top-ranking officers in the Area G formation. What really happened?

We are still investigating the officers involved in the reported cases and until we have all the details, we can't say exactly all that happened. Let's look at the population of the Nigeria Police Force, especially in Lagos State. We have about 30,000 officers. If, out of this number, there are bad eggs, it would be nice to consider the percentage. The police is just a reflection of the society at large. We have other countries where the crime rate is higher than what we have in Nigeria, so also do we have those with lower crime rate. This means that there is need for a rethink by the administrators of various facets of this country. Something has to be done.

Looking at those who have been arrested, are they among the rank and file?

We have arrested six policemen. Three of them are officers.

Does that not indicate an indictment on the recruitment process of the police?

People always talk about the recruitment process of the police. Is that the only place where there is crime? Even if the church wants to employ pastors, you would not be surprised that some weird persons would be employed as pastors. Somebody you are about to employ would not show you all his character at the point of entry. If the person is a thief or is greedy, you cannot know. The only provision the government has made is that, when somebody is to be recruited, you go into his past. How do you do this? It's by fingerprint. If there are records of his previous criminal involvements, the fingerprint would reveal all these. Under normal circumstances and in the Criminal Procedures Act, when somebody is arrested, his fingerprint and photographs must be in the records. You also do this when he is charged to court. So, when somebody is about to be recruited, you would check all his records. This should not be for employment only, it should also come in handy when somebody is seeking a political post. Before now, we were 120,000. Suddenly, we are recruiting 40,000 every year and now we have over 300,000. What we need is in-house monitoring of our officers. This would enable us fish out the bad eggs in the police force. We have not got to the level where, by merely looking at you, a psychologist can tell what is on your mind.

Was this in-house monitoring the strategy you adopted to smash the robbery syndicate?

Yes, it was a tip-off. Our people pretended to be part of them

and we were able to arrest them.

Does the Nigerian Police have fingerprint equipment?

Yes, we have that. And, at present, government has released money to buy more equipment. Now, we have 84 police divisions in Lagos, 83 police posts and eight area commands compared to the less than 10 that we had some years back. All the police posts are expected to have fingerprint equipment so that better records can be kept. The best thing about this is that no two persons can have the same fingerprint. So, this in-house monitoring I talked about would enable us know more about ourselves because sometimes we don't really know the kind of



Adebayo: 'We have to be on our toes'

person we are working with. It is important. That is also to say that government has to do something about our barracks accommodation. If we are all living together in one area, then I can know when you go out and come in. Most of our policemen live in different areas of the city; some we don't know where they live at all. This monitoring would ensure that we stay under a unit. We would be able to determine the lazy ones, the hardworking ones and the covetous ones among us. This would also enable us determine those who are living above their means.

Apart from constant harassment of the citizenry, people are finding it difficult to differentiate between policemen wearing mufti and carrying their rifles at checkpoints and robbers.

It is illegal for any policeman to wear mufti and stand on the road in his mufti. And, when we see illegality. Recently, I ordered that no policeman should be found doing checking in the whole of Area G and it has stopped.

Why only Area G?

It was because the incidence of checkpoint in Area G was becoming embarrassing. It was too much.

Robbers seem to have devised a new way of carrying out their operations as they now freely wear police uniforms to rob people. Does this not indicate a kind of connivance with some policemen?

One thing I want you to know is that the nature of crime is constantly changing. Crime is never on a stable graph. It's always going up and down. The best thing is for the police to think ahead because robbers are forever coming up with new ideas. So, we also have to be on our toes. Robbers are always planning and monitoring their victims. But we have tried to maintain a low crime rate in Lagos. We also know we should do more because we are committed to a relatively crime-free society.

Still a Force to Reckon With

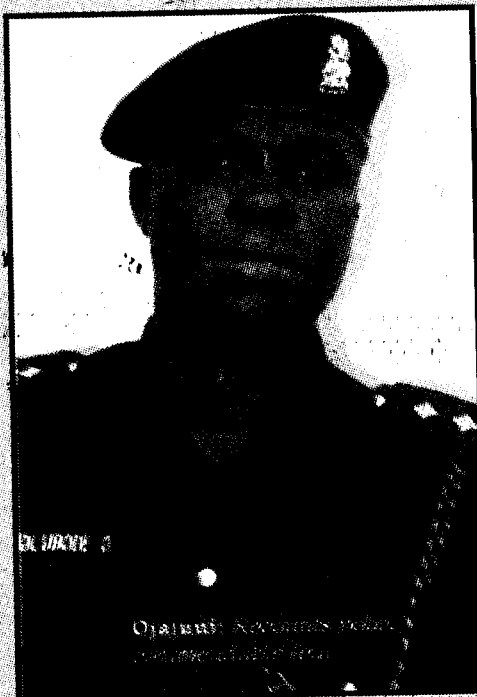
Despite shocking revelations of how some policemen perpetrate criminal acts, indications show that majority of the eggs in the force are not rotten

By KAYODE FASUA

It was a quarter to 2 am and the divisional police officer, DPO, of a police station in Epe, Lagos State was yet to sleep. He was jolted by the staccato sound of gunshots. He strained his ears and noticed that the booming guns were no ordinary firearms. They were high-calibre rifles. He wondered how any anti-robbery squad of the command could invade his territory without an advance notice via the walkie-talkie. But a thought flickered: "They may be armed robbers". He dashed to his armoury, mobilised his men and zoomed off into the dark. That was in the wee hours of Thursday, June 16, 2006. And, later that day, information filtered in that the DPO of Epe Police Station had foiled an attempt by a gang of armed robbers to rob a first generation bank in the locality. According to Olubode Ojajumi, a deputy superintendent of police and spokesman for the Lagos Police Command, the team, led by the DPO, repelled the rampaging robbery gang which had even gained entry into the banking hall. The police team, he said, engaged the hoodlums in a fierce gun battle that lasted three hours. The outgunned criminals, who saw money but could not touch it, soon jumped into their speedboat, escaping through an adjoining waterway.

Just while the police were upbeat at the commendable feat they had performed, same day, a notable household in the aboriginal settlement of Ikeja, the state capital, was overcome by grief. A member of the family, the only son of his mother, was among those who attempted to rob the Epe bank. Sources said other surviving members of the gang had hurriedly brought his corpse to his family and taken flight after a brisk pep talk with a family elder. Implication of this melo-drama was that the police had killed this young robber during exchange of gunfire but the others escaped with their dead, to foreclose trace.

Against the heap of public opprobrium that gives away the policeman as the enemy next door, this instance portrays the police as "a friend of the public". Ifedayo Daramola, a social analyst and Mass Communication lecturer at the Lagos State Polytechnic, believes that "the police can work if they want to. They know the home address of every armed robber in this country." In his view, the police had been rendered effete in the face of festering criminal acts because, oftentimes, they lack sophisticated weapons to challenge criminals. "When armed robbers are going about their 'jobs' with firearms and you buy *shakabula* (low profile guns) for the policemen, how then do you want them to go and face sure death?" He also suggests that the police reform committee, which recently assessed police formations nationwide, should make definite recommendations on how to enrich the police armoury and also enhance their welfare. "And government, too, must implement their



suggestions", he urges.

Also, a refrain that the police are fond of betraying informants, which discourages the public from assisting them with helpful information, may have made the job of the cop a herculean one. But, in what appears to be an ensuing breeze of impeccable professional conduct helpful to national ethos, some newbreed policemen are now in the service. Investigations by the magazine reveal that this crop of police personnel, though few in number, is set to help redeem the police image. Some of them displayed the stuff of which they are made in Ota, Ogun State, last week.

worker with Purechem Industries, Ota, manufacturers of furniture chemicals, had colluded with armed robbers to rob his company of N2.3 million. The information leaked to someone who went to inform the police. Rather than betray this informant, the police gave him a pat on the back and went ahead to stop the robbery. Parading the unfaithful work (names withheld) before newsmen

Abeokuta, Joseph Apapa, the state police commissioner, gave kudos to his men who, through their detective sagacity, infiltrated the robbers and thus saved the company its millions.

This same crop of officers was replicated in the manner the police-robbery mafia at 'Area G' formation in the Lagos Police Command was exposed. Giving a detailed account to the magazine, Emmanuel Adebayo, the state police commissioner, said he was initially disturbed over unsavoury reports on the conduct of some of his men and officers. "I first sat down and said 'what do I do?' Particularly, I was concerned about the 'Area G' situation. First, I realised we needed a monitoring system, a detective outfit within, to help sanitise the system. And this did... Yes, it was a tip-off that helped us to fish out the bad eggs in 'Area G'. Our people pretended to be part of them and were able to arrest them," he explained.

The police, observers say, are not entirely bad but require the kind of 'Adebayo formula' to purge the force of its bad eggs. Nwuzor Okereke, a trader, also recalled that, recently in Enugu, a policeman assisted him to arrest some fraudsters who went out to fleece him of his goods through cunning. "So, after your assistance, I put a sum of N5,000 inside a white envelope and offered him but he politely turned it down," Okereke recalled.

However, many policemen in the rank and file, who spoke with TELL, pleaded with the authorities to increase their salaries, noting that, without an enhanced salary package, the cops who shun bribes will only remain in the class of the wretched of the earth. A sergeant in Ilorin, the Kwara State capital, confided in the magazine that his less than N10,000 salary can only meet his needs up to the 10th day of the month. "After this, I rely on *roger* (bribe)", he said.